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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: THE STATE OF THE MEDIA - STILL A LONG WAY TO
GO

1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

2. (SBU) SUMMARY: On November 26, the Kazakhstani Press Club hosted a conference on the state of the media in Kazakhstan. Some 200 people -- including media experts, representatives of international and nongovernmental organizations, editors, and journalists -- participated in the conference. (NOTE: The Ministry of Information and Culture did not send a representative to the event, citing "lack of available time." END NOTE.) Conference panelists concluded that faulty media legislation, lack of competition among media outlets, large numbers of paid articles, poor management and strategic planning, and the poor quality of journalism training have hampered the development of a professional media market in Kazakhstan. END SUMMARY.

SURVEY REVEALS WEAK MASS MEDIA

3. (SBU) In preparation for the conference, the Kazakhstani Press Club worked with Kazakhstani-Russian market research company BRiF to conduct a survey on the media environment. Thirty-six media experts between the ages of 40 and 50 participated in the survey. Eighty-one percent of respondents said the current state of media in Kazakhstan was "fair," and 13 percent said it was "poor." Only six percent of respondents said the state of the Kazakhstani mass media was "good." When asked what needed to be done to improve the mass media in Kazakhstan, 50 percent of respondents said it was necessary to change legislation to eliminate state control and censorship, 19 percent said it was necessary to create a fair and open media market, and 17 percent said the system of education and training for journalists needed to be improved. As for objective reporting, 94 percent of the media experts said the mass media served the political interests of particular groups, whether it was the government, opposition, or oligarchs. When asked if they thought stated circulation numbers were accurate, 58 percent of respondents said "no." Last, most respondents stated that the Kazakhstani mass media offered little or no competition with Russian and Western media outlets, but at the same time they considered Kazakhstan's media to be much stronger than the media in other Central Asian countries.

GOSZAKAZ AND LACK OF COMPETITION

14. (SBU) Many conference panelists said that the Kazakhstani media were totally dependent on their owners and that, consequently, media content did not meet readers' needs. Experts spoke at length about the increasing dependence of many Kazakhstani newspapers on "goszakaz," which literally means "orders placed by government" and refers to government subsidies for media that have operated since the Soviet period. After Kazakhstan became independent, only the TV and radio station Khabar, owned 51 percent by the government, received goszakaz. By 2004, however, the Ministry of Information and Culture decided to make this largesse widely available, posting story ideas eligible for funding on its website. Initially, goszakaz was meant to support coverage of certain social issues, Kazakh language media, and the development of regional media. But over time, panelists said, goszakaz has had a negative impact on the media market by making many media outlets heavily dependent on government funding and producing the predictable result: a media environment in which government subsidies equal government power to control content and interfere with editorial decisions.

15. (SBU) Dosym Satpayev, a leading Kazakhstani political scientist and director of the Risks Assessment Group, his one-man Almaty-based think tank, spoke about the lack of competition as a threat to national security. Satpayev argued that the elimination of alternative information sources created an "information blockade" around the country's key decision-making centers. As a result, he said, the very people who were charged with making well-informed decisions on behalf of the country were actually not informed. Satpayev stated that the lack of competitive media "dooms Kazakhstan to the information periphery" and forces Kazakhstanis to consume "alien information and ideology." He used the recent conflict

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between Georgia and Russia as an example. He said that Kazakhstanis who watched Russian media reports on the situation took Russia and South Ossetia's side, and those who watched BBC and CNN coverage were supportive of Georgia. As he put it, "if a state cannot integrate into the world information-telecommunications system as an independent player, then the independence and sovereignty of such a state might become questionable."

MASS MEDIA AND THE LAW

16. (SBU) Conference panelist Tamara Kaleyeva, head of the media NGO Adil Soz, said that new media legislation to implement one of Kazakhstan's Madrid commitments would rescind several amendments to Kazakhstan's media law that were made just two years ago at the behest of then Minister of Information and Culture Yermukhamed Yertysbayev. (NOTE: The amendments were opposed at the time by many international and nongovernmental organizations. END NOTE.) According to Kaleyeva, current Information and Culture Minister Mukhtar Kul-Mukhammed wants to eliminate the 2006 amendments to show that the government supports press freedom prior to Kazakhstan's assuming the OSCE chairmanship in 2010. She nevertheless discounted the impact of the new legislation, arguing that "the government decided to do us a favor and threw us a pittance like a master to a lackey."

POOR TRAINING MAKES POOR JOURNALISTS

17. (SBU) Although panel experts in the field of education had differing views on why enrollment in journalism departments is declining, they all agreed that the quality of journalism training in Kazakhstan is poor. Twenty-three universities in Kazakhstan have journalism departments, and experts agreed that they all share a similar weakness -- an overemphasis on theory and lack of practical courses teaching reporting skills. Conference participants suggested other reasons for the decline in enrollment, such as the lack of opportunity to conduct "real reporting" once in the workplace. Panelists said that newspaper owners do not consider the print media a business and, due to lack of competition, many articles do not contain original reporting, instead merely reprinting content from the Internet. Similarly, panelists noted most television stations prefer not to spend time and money developing original programming, but instead prefer to show films or

rebroadcast programs created by Russian stations. (COMMENT:
Panelists' comments regarding journalism training were of special
interest to post, since we are trying to establish a journalism
school in Almaty. The purpose of the school is to teach students
practical skills based on Western journalistic standards. Post's
proposed curriculum is heavy on professional skills courses and
reporting projects, with less focus on mass media theory. END
COMMENT.)

HOAGLAND